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Deaths in the Family

A shake-out was inevitable: with new magazines being born virtually every week in the past few years, they simply couldn't all survive. And last week, when both New Times and Viva announced they would suspend publication at the end of the year, it looked as if it might already have begun.

The two magazines joined a growing list of fatalities. Horizon ceased publishing as a national cultural magazine when it was bought in September by the publisher of Antiques Monthly. After losing $2 million in two years, Rolling Stone's Outside was purchased last month by another outdoors publication, Mariah. The tabloid Politicks folded last spring after only six months, and McCall's recently announced that the December issue of Your Place, its new magazine for people in their 20s, would be the last. Even the magazine about journalism—More—went out of business last summer.

Magazines have always been a risky business. Start-up costs are high, and it may take years to reach the break-even point. Magazines of general interest, which compete with television and other mass media for audience and advertising dollars, must offer their readers a unique perspective and have enough capital to blanket the market. The more specialized publications have to appeal to enough readers and advertisers to survive. Given the move toward special interests in the '70s, most of the new ventures have preferred to go this route. "To make it these days," says New Times publisher George A. Hirsch, "a magazine must have a built-in constituency and a generic advertising base."

Impact: New Times had neither. A product of the Watergate rage of investigative reporting, the biweekly attracted a stable of young and hungry writers, and the impact of some of their articles reached far beyond the magazine's modest readership. It was a New Times piece that reported the racial slurs that eventually forced Earl Butz to resign as Secretary of Agriculture. The magazine's investigation of Peter Reilly, a young man convicted of killing his mother, helped to overturn the verdict, and an exclusive jailhouse interview with William and Emily Harris turned up a key piece of evidence used in the Patty Hearst trial.

Unfortunately, the magazine's idealism outlasted that of its readers. People used to read about politics and national affairs," lamented editor Jonathan Z.

John Ficara—Newsweek

Hirsch (top), Larsen: An identity crisis or the end of an era?

John Ficara—Newsweek

ing and Cheryl Tiegs—and that's just not where we're at."

One problem was that the magazine never really decided where it was. With its slick graphics and somber articles about the environment and cancer, New Times wavered between being a serious journal and a counter-culture sheet. And sometimes it even slipped into sloppy journalism altogether—as in a cover story about the John F. Kennedy assassination which was long on speculation and short on fact.

Two years ago, Hirsch and Larsen attempted to invigorate the magazine and brought John Lombardi from Chic as executive editor. New Times began to run lighter, more sensational stories on subjects ranging from skateboarding to "Soap"—with a cover featuring a bare-breasted woman popping out of a television screen. It was a period of internal chaos, and staff loyalty to Larsen's issue-oriented approach was waning. At one point last year, when he was away on vacation, there was nearly an in-house revolt against the editor.

Meanwhile, financial problems overshadowed its editorial conflicts. A victim of increasing postal rates and declining readership,

with each issue and the circulation, at 350,000, had not increased in the past year. In desperation, Hirsch, Larsen and associate publisher Nicholas H. Niles considered issuing New Times as a monthly and even changing the name, but in the end they decided that there was no alternative but to stop publishing.

Tearfully, Hirsch delivered the news to his stunned writers and editors, who had had no inkling of the magazine's demise. Only eleven months ago, New Times was acquired by the gigantic entertainment company, MCA Inc., which paid several million dollars for the property and promised to "accelerate the growth" of the magazine. Eager to gain a stronghold in the publishing business, the Los Angeles-based MCA was also clearly interested in the publishing experience of Hirsch, the former publisher of New York magazine. He will continue his exploration of potential magazine acquisitions for MCA, as well as publish his new magazine, The Runner, under the company's aegis.

Randy: Viva's demise was brought about by a slightly different identity crisis. The sibling of publisher Bob Guccione's randy Penthouse, Viva was a magazine for women written from a man's point of view. When it began five years ago, the monthly was full of breathless advice about sex and luscious photographs of nude men. Not surprisingly, Viva appealed more to men—gay and otherwise—than to women, and not at all to magazine distributors. Supermarkets refused to display the provocative book, and newsstands tucked it in with their other girlie magazines.

Subsequently, Viva got dressed and redirected itself to "the intelligent working woman," but it was never more than a half-hearted effort. Despite its striking fashion photographs and layouts, the magazine continued to run concupiscent covers and a collection of articles ranging from salacious to kinky. Viva never did manage to find its market, and, as a result, the circulation plummeted from an original press run of 1 million to 300,000.

"I blame it on the prejudices of the bloody distributors," says Kathy Keeton, Viva's editor and Guccione's girlfriend. "They always thought it was a dirty magazine for women, despite our expensive advertising campaign to reposition Viva on the newsstands. Viva meant so much to Bob and me. It feels like we've lost a